

Third Place: Luyang Jin

If I Were a Court Translator, What a Difference I Would Make

Judges, lawyers, law enforcement officers, and public defenders are all big name players in the justice system. Often overshadowed in the municipal court are the court translators who provide simultaneous translation of oral passages. If I were a court translator, then what a difference I could make.

Many people who have not been forced by circumstances to intentionally learn and use a language other than their native tongue cannot contemplate the difficulty of communicating thoughts in another language. I have personally witnessed the distress of non-English speakers mentally racking their brains, searching for word substitutes that can replace the expressions they cannot articulate in English. Often in those moments of crisis when people are reduced to blubbing fools, I would step in and alleviate their distress. Court translators play this role in the professional courts. The duties of translators are especially important in municipal courts, where hesitation and frustration can mislead first impressions and inadvertently affect life-changing verdicts.

Being a court translator has immense pressures. The non-English speakers would entirely be dependent upon my knowledge and abilities. The way I conserve the meaning and tone of an original statement could affect the reaction of the answers or statements given in reply. I would have to make sure that in every phrase, there is no confusion or ambiguity when I translate the original message. However, the pressure does not compare to the personal fulfillment that I would receive. The intrinsic job satisfaction in helping others is a powerful motivator that will drive me to improve my job performance.

Most people think that simply being bilingual is enough to constitute a career as a court translator. However, translators must be comfortable with both legal jargon and street slang. Being an interpreter implies that it is my responsibility to both clarify slang terms for court officers and translate attorneys' extensive vocabulary into layman terms. Being an interpreter also signifies that I would have to accurately render everything that is spoken, including sporadic phrases, without omissions or additions to the original meaning.

The city of Houston should have a strategy to improve court interpreter services. Beyond the basic orientation program, a long-range program should be enacted that includes three broad goals. The first would be to provide continuous explanations on changing court procedures, ethical conduct, legal terminology, and the like. The second would be to monitor translation proficiency, testing knowledge of formal and slang expressions. The third would be to provide general cultural information on the people that interpreters are helping. The sessions should produce qualified interpreters who are not only able to insure effective communication, but have broader culture perspectives and updated knowledge of the workings of the court system.

Being a professional court translator might not be the most glamorous thing in the world. However, if I can touch even one person's life and aid them in their supreme moment of need, then it would all be worth it.